

# Review of Ross Cameron (2015), *The Moving Spotlight: An Essay on Time and Ontology*<sup>1</sup>

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Ross Cameron's recent monograph *The Moving Spotlight: An Essay on Time and Ontology* makes an important contribution to contemporary metaphysics of time, for it is (as far as I am aware) the first book-length defence of the *moving spotlight theory*, the theory that combines *eternalism* (the view that all past and future objects and events exist) and the *A-theory* (the view that there is an absolute, objective present moment). The book is divided into five chapters. In the first two chapters, Cameron responds to two arguments that have traditionally been levelled against the moving spotlight theory and whose widespread acceptance has contributed to the view's historical unpopularity, namely, that it implies that we cannot know that we are present (Chapter 1), and that it is vulnerable to McTaggart's famous argument for the inconsistency of the A-theory (Chapter 2).<sup>2</sup> In Chapters 3 and 4 Cameron develops an innovative new version of the moving spotlight theory, and defends the view by arguing that it successfully provides grounds for 'tensed' truths and cross-time relations (unlike rival A-theory *presentism*, according to which only present objects and events exist)<sup>3</sup> as well as providing a satisfying account of what it is for a time to be *present simpliciter*. Finally, in Chapter 5 Cameron argues that his theory does a better job of capturing the idea that 'the future is open' than the rival *growing block theory* (according to which only past and present objects and events exist). He concludes that his version of the moving spotlight theory 'never does worse than a rival [A-]theory, and for each rival [A-]theory it does better than it in at

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Ross Cameron, Cian Dorr and Brad Skow for very useful comments.

<sup>2</sup> McTaggart, J. M. E., "The Unreality of Time" *Mind* XVII (1908): 457-74.

<sup>3</sup> Some theorists have recently cast doubt on the contentfulness of presentism and related theses – see especially Deasy, D., "What is Presentism?" (forthcoming in *Noûs*).

least one respect' (p. 16).

The book is a pleasure to read. Cameron is an engaging writer who has the enviable ability to clearly explain difficult notions and complex arguments. He is fair to his opponents: one is almost always made aware of where one might diverge from his approach, and such divergence is never presented as intellectually untenable. In this sense, one is reminded of the work of David Lewis. Moreover, like Lewis, Cameron's obvious delight in doing metaphysics is clearly transmitted through his writing – reading the book reminded me of why I enjoy the subject so much. Philosophically the book is very rich, packed with thought-provoking ideas and arguments. Anyone with an interest in the philosophy of time, and contemporary metaphysics more generally, should read it.

The best way to get a grip on Cameron's version of the moving spotlight theory is to begin with what, according to the view, *never changes*. According to Cameron's view there is a permanent spacetime manifold in which all the objects and events there ever are are permanently located. Hence (for example) Caesar and the coronation of the first Mars president both exist, and are permanently located in past and future spatiotemporal regions respectively. Moments of time are identified with maximal three-dimensional slices of the manifold. Individuals permanently instantiate fundamental *temporal distributional properties*: properties of having a particular sort of cross-time qualitative profile. A simple example of a temporal distributional property (although plausibly not a fundamental one) would be being red for the first half of one's lifetime and then blue for the second half. (According to Cameron, each individual instantiates exactly one such property – or at least, exactly one such *fundamental* property. This is surprising: if something has the temporal distributional property of being red for the first half of its life and blue for the second half, surely it also has the property of being red for the first half of its life; and if the former property is fundamental, why not the latter?)

So what *changes* according to Cameron’s view? Lots of things! For instance, given Cameron’s view, Caesar *was* crossing the Rubicon but he is no longer; I am now 6ft tall but I haven’t always been; and 1066 *was* present but it isn’t any more. More generally, given Cameron’s view many propositions about how things are are *temporary* – that is, they change in truth-value simpliciter over time. But what, according to Cameron, are the ‘truthmakers’ for temporary propositions such as that Caesar crossed the Rubicon and that I am now 6ft tall (where *p* is a *truthmaker* for *q* just in case ‘*p*’s being the case explains, in more fundamental terms, why *q* is the case’ (p. 114))?<sup>4</sup> They are propositions concerning the existence of certain temporary *states of affairs*. In particular, they are propositions concerning the existence of states of affairs of some *x*’s having a certain spatiotemporal location, temporal distributional property, and age – where *x*’s *age* is the amount of time that has passed since *x* began to occupy spacetime. For example, my age is thirty-something years; the truth of the (temporary) proposition that I am 6ft tall is grounded in the truth of the proposition that there is a certain state of affairs of my having the particular temporal distributional property and location I (always) have and my being the (temporary) age I am.

We saw above that according to Cameron’s view Caesar exists, and therefore exists *now* (p. 131). But what, according to Cameron’s view, is Caesar *like* now? Cameron writes (p. 149):

He [Caesar] now has no height, no mass, no ordinary 3D shape... the only properties Caesar now has are ones he always has (such as his temporal distributional property, his [spatiotemporal] location... and his essential properties such as being concrete, being a human, etc.)

On this point it is useful to compare Cameron’s theory with another A-theory according to which objects and events exist permanently, namely, Sullivan’s (2012) ‘minimal A-theory’.<sup>5</sup>

On Sullivan’s view, Caesar exists now but is no longer human, or has mass, or even has a

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<sup>4</sup> According to Cameron (Chapter 3), the goal for theorists of time should be to provide ‘non-tensed’ truthmakers for ‘tensed’ truths (such as that Caesar crossed the Rubicon), rather than analyses of ‘tensed’ notions (such as something’s *having been* the case). I return to this point below.

<sup>5</sup> Sullivan, M., “The Minimal A-theory”, *Philosophical Studies* CLVIII (2012): 149-74.

spatial location. More generally, on Sullivan's view many of the most 'interesting' properties of things are temporary (that is, gained and lost over time). In contrast, on Cameron's view at least some of the 'interesting' properties of things – such as having a location, being concrete, being human, or being a dinosaur – are *permanent*. In that sense, Cameron's view is closer than Sullivan's to the static 'block universe' picture defended by B-theorists such as Skow (2015).<sup>6</sup> However, Cameron's additional permanent structure has costs. For example, Cameron must reject the plausible-sounding principle that if something is human (or a dinosaur) then it has mass – on his view, Caesar is a human with no mass. He must also admit that there are concrete humans like Caesar who are over 2,000 years old (although he could argue that the sentence 'Some humans are over 2,000 years old' has a reading on which it is false). And given that on Cameron's view dinosaurs exist (as dinosaurhood is a permanent property) and what is the case is the case now, it follows that on Cameron's view *dinosaurs exist now*. This is something many A-theorists will find hard to accept.

Cameron argues that his view has the following virtues (among others): first, it 'avoids having to take any tensed fact as fundamental' (p. 127); and second, it avoids having to 'take it is a primitive feature of reality that some time is present' (p. 151). Let us begin with the first virtue. What does Cameron mean when he says that his view 'avoids having to take any tensed fact as fundamental'? There are two natural ways of understanding this claim, but neither seems available to Cameron. On the first reading, it means that on Cameron's view there are no fundamental temporary truths. However, on Cameron's view there *are* fundamental temporary truths, such as the proposition that the state of affairs of my being thirty-something years old exists. On the second reading, it means that Cameron is not committed to the fundamentality of temporal operators like 'it was the case that' (or temporal predicates like 'is past'). But this reading does not seem to be available to Cameron, as he

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<sup>6</sup> Skow, B., *Objective Becoming* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

explicitly rejects the ‘Quine-Lewis-Sider’ view according to which theories are associated with primitive ‘joint-carving’ ideologies (Chapter 3).

As for the second virtue, it is true that Cameron does not have to ‘take it is a primitive feature of reality that some time is present’, at least in the sense that on his view facts that attribute presentness are made true by facts that do not: on Cameron’s view, the fact that this time is present is made true by the fact that there is a state of affairs of everything’s being such that the age it has at this time is just its age simpliciter. But whether this is an *advantage* of Cameron’s view surely depends on whether the view is, overall, theoretically more virtuous than one that *is* such that facts concerning presentness are among the fundamental truthmakers. As an example of such a view, consider a version of the moving spotlight theory that (like Cameron’s view) identifies times with slices of the manifold but (unlike Cameron’s view) characterises the present time as the time that instantiates the fundamental property of presentness. This theory provides the following analyses of the standard temporal operators and ‘at time  $t$ ’:

WAS:  $P\varphi$  just in case at some past time,  $\varphi$

WILL:  $F\varphi$  just in case at some future time,  $\varphi$

AT-T: At time  $t$ ,  $\varphi$  [where  $\varphi$  is a sentence free from temporal operators and ‘at  $t$ ’] just in case  $\varphi$  [with all occurrences of ‘is present’ in  $\varphi$  replaced with ‘= $t$ ’]

Finally, the theory posits lots of unvoiced quantification over the present time in ordinary thought and speech, so that (for example) ‘Ross is happy’ has the form ‘ $\exists t(t$  is present & Happy(Ross,  $t$ ))’ and ‘There were dinosaurs’ has the form ‘ $P(\exists t(t$  is present &  $\exists x$  (Dinosaur( $x$ ,  $t$ )))’ (which given the above analyses is true just in case something bears the dinosaur relation to a past time.) On this version of the moving spotlight theory – call it *Classic MST* – the only *temporary* fundamental property is presentness simpliciter, and all

change reduces to change in which time is present. The question is: why does Cameron reject this sort of moving spotlight theory?

It is possible to see why Cameron might reject Classic MST. In §2.3 Cameron describes a version of the moving spotlight theory inspired by Bricker's (2006) theory of modality – call it *Brickerian MST* – on which times are identified with slices of the manifold and exactly one time bears the temporary fundamental property of presentness.<sup>7</sup> Cameron characterises Brickerian MST as a view which implies the following principle:

PRESENTNESS: For all times  $t, t^*$ : at  $t, t^*$  is present just in case  $t=t^*$

Classic MST also implies PRESENTNESS: given that on Classic MST 'at time  $t, \phi$ ' is equivalent to  $\phi$  with all occurrences of 'is present' in  $\phi$  replaced with '= $t$ ', it follows that e.g. 'At 1066, 1066 is present' is true just in case  $1066=1066$ .

Cameron rejects Brickerian MST on the grounds that it is 'really' a view according to which there is never any change in which time is present. He writes that 'the moving spotlihter, if she adopted the Bricker proposal, could not distinguish herself from a stuck spotlihter with a fancy semantics'. The objection seems to be as follows: consider the fundamental description  $D$  of the world according to Classic MST. Now consider the fundamental description  $D^*$  of the world according to the *Stuck Spotlight Theory*, a version of the moving spotlight theory which posits the same permanent fundamental structure as Classic MST but according to which there is one time that is *always* present (from which it follows that PRESENTNESS is false). It looks like  $D=D^*$  – in other words, the difference between Classic MST and the Stuck Spotlight Theory does not show up at the fundamental level. In that sense, the two theories are 'really' the same theory. The question is: why is this a problem for Classic MST (or Brickerian MST)? Even if Classic MST is 'really' the same

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<sup>7</sup> See Bricker, P., "Absolute Actuality and the Plurality of Worlds", *Philosophical Perspectives* XX (2006): 41-76.

theory as the Stuck Spotlight Theory *in that sense*, it remains a distinct theory – in particular, it remains the case that given Classic MST, it is *false* that there is one time that is always present. (For example, call the present time Tim. Given Classic MST, the proposition that always, Tim is present implies that for all times  $t$ , Tim is present; given PRESENTNESS, it follows that Tim is identical with every time, which is false.) Indeed, Cameron admits as much: he writes that according to Brickerian MST (and by implication Classic MST) ‘*really* there is a stuck spotlight... But we can nevertheless say that the spotlight moves... we nonetheless secure the truth of ordinary claims concerning the changing of what time is present’ (p. 85). But if the Classic MSTer can *say* that which time is present changes, and what she says is *true*, her view is *not* one according to which there is one time that is always present. The fact that the difference between Classic MST and the Stuck Spotlight Theory does not show up at the fundamental level is interesting, but it is hard to see how it constitutes an objection to the view.

Finally, consider a theory – call it the *Stuck Cameronian View* – that is just like Cameron’s view but on which everything has the age it has *permanently* (Caesar is always 2,100 years old, and so on). What distinguishes the fundamental descriptions of the world according to Cameron’s view and the Stuck Cameronian View? According to both theories, the world consists in a spacetime manifold populated with objects and events with temporal distributional properties and ages. On the latter but not the former theory, things *always* have the ages they have now; however, that difference between the theories does not show up at the fundamental level. Therefore Cameron would seem to have to admit that his own theory is (in that sense) ‘*really*’ the Stuck Cameronian View. Now, I do not think this is a real problem for Cameron: his theory is simply not one according to which things have their ages permanently, and therefore remains distinct from the Stuck Cameronian View. However, this is analogous to what the Classic MSTer would say in response to Cameron’s objection to *her*

view.

In conclusion, it seems that a version of the moving spotlight theory along the lines of Classic MST remains a competitor to Cameron's view. Which theory should be preferred can only be decided by further investigation into the relative merits and drawbacks of both views.